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THE DISINTEGRATION OF A HIGH-SCHOOL CLASS

A STUDY IN ELIMINATION

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The problem.—School superintendents are interested in the fact that so many students drop out of school even after they have successfully passed the perils supposed to be incident to the grammar grades and have gained admission to the high school. The record of one such class is presented here.

The environment.—Anoka is a place of about four thousand people, situated nineteen miles from Minneapolis. Its inhabitants are blessed with considerable material comforts and a goodly share of intellectual ones. There is a fair public library, and many fraternal orders and churches. There are a few small factories and mills, but the business consists mainly of trade with the surrounding agricultural district. The village of Champlin, across the Mississippi, sends its children to the Anoka high school, itself maintaining only the eight grades.

There is an abundance of adult labor in the market, so that there is very little need or temptation for boys of high-school age to go to work. On the contrary, public opinion is very strongly in favor of the young people remaining in school as long as possible. The town is one where the school sentiment is strong. A large proportion of those who graduate go to higher institutions.

The school itself ranks among the largest and the best in the state. It is on the accredited list of the North Central Association. It has a faculty of nine teachers besides the superintendent. Its home is a new, well-equipped building, centrally located. A liberal variety of work is offered, with a wide range of electives both as to courses and as to subjects within the courses. There is work in commercial and industrial subjects, and a normal training department for prospective rural teachers. About 35 per cent of the pupils are non-resident, coming in from the surrounding farms and villages.

The class.—The class that entered the high school in September, 1907, numbered seventy-three—twenty-three boys and fifty girls: about the usual proportion. The tables which follow summarize the recorded history of the class.

TABLE I

GROUP	RECORD	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL	
				Number	Percentage of all Entrants
1....	Remained four years and graduated	5	13	18	24.6
2....	Remained four years but did not graduate...	5	11	16	21.9
3....	Remained three years and then dropped out.	1	2	3	4.2
4....	Remained two years and dropped out during the third year.....	0	0	0	0.0
5....	Remained two years and then dropped out..	1	3	4	5.4
6....	Remained one year and dropped out during the second year.....	0	3	3	4.2
7....	Remained one year and then dropped out...	4	6	10	13.7
8....	Dropped out during the first year.....	6*	10	16	21.9
9....	Attended only <i>parts</i> of three years.....	1	1	2	2.7
10....	Attended only <i>parts</i> of two years.....	0	1	1	1.3
Total.....		23	50	73	100.0

* Two of these boys worked until the year 1910-11, when they again entered school, one at the beginning of the year, with the avowed intention of graduating, and the other at the beginning of the second semester, for the remainder of the year only.

TABLE II

GROUP	RECORD	BOYS			GIRLS			TOTAL	
		Number	Percentage of all Boy Entrants	Percentage of Group	Number	Percentage of all Girl Entrants	Percentage of Group	Number	Percentage of all Entrants
I (1)....	Remained four years and graduated.....	5	21.7	27.7	13	26.0	72.3	18	24.6
II (2) ...	Remained four years but did not graduate	5	21.7	31.2	11	22.0	68.8	16	21.9
III (3-10)	Dropped out before the fourth year....	13	56.4	33.3	26	52.0	66.6	39	53.5
Totals		23	100.0	31.5	50	100.0	68.5	73	100.0

Additions to the class.—There came into the class in its second year in the high school three new members. These all dropped out of the class, but remained in school until the fourth

year. Four others joined it during the third year. Of these, two removed from the city, one dropped into a lower class, and one graduated. One student entered the class in the Senior year and graduated.

The causes of elimination.—Of course the important thing is to ascertain the causes of the serious amount of elimination from this class, whose record, we think, is by no means exceptional. On examination of the records, which are complete so far as the mere matter of standings is concerned, we find the following conditions to have prevailed at the time the individual students left school:

Failing in all subjects	10	
Failing in three subjects	2	
Failing in two subjects	11	
Failing in one subject	5	
Up to grade in all subjects.....	7	
No records (left during first month)	2	
Failing in all work, but really left to marry.....	2	
Total	39	
	Number	Percentage
Failing in greater or less degree.....	30	76.9
Up to grade in all work.....	7	17.9
Unknown	2	5.1
Totals	39	100.0

These numbers show that 59 per cent of those who dropped out were failing so badly that satisfactory progress through the course was improbable if not impossible, while about 18 per cent were all right in their studies. Many of these removed from town, but some left without any apparent reason. Another 13 per cent were failing, but to so small an extent that the recovery of their classification could reasonably be expected.

The strong hold of the school upon its students, backed by the fine school sentiment of the community, can be seen in the fact that sixteen who failed to keep up with the class nevertheless remained in school.

We can here see the superficial causes for the elimination of pupils from the high school. Back of them lie the real causes.

If a student drops out because he is failing in his work, the legitimate inquiry is, Why does he fail in his work? What things in the make-up of the student or in his environment made him fail? No school records show these. Few, if any, schools attempt to find them out. Was failure due to home influences; to outside influences: parties, dances, shows, tobacco, poolroom, loafing; to school influences: unattractive courses and buildings, ill-prepared or unsympathetic teachers; or to what complex combinations of all these things?

The reports of the State High School Inspector and of the National Commissioner of Education show that approximately 12.5 per cent of the enrolment of the high schools graduate each year. This school has an average record of nearly 17 per cent of its enrolment in the graduating class. Hence many other schools must have classes that disintegrate as rapidly as the one discussed.

The mortality seems to be too great. What can be done to avert such losses?

A friendly critic who read the above in manuscript wishes the writer to "discuss the question of whether the standards of this school are not too high for its constituency."

We think not. The course and the texts are those usual in the high schools of the state. The final examinations are not governed by local ideas, but are those prepared under the auspices of the State High School Board and used generally throughout the state. Moreover, the people here are of a high grade of intelligence and possess a degree of education and culture above the average as individuals and as a community. This is shown by a variety of things: by the churches and clubs, social, literary, and recreational; by the patronage of the city library, which was founded years before the Carnegie era began; by the attendance on the high school, constituting about 25 per cent of the total school enrolment; by the interest of the adult citizens in school affairs; and by the fact that the average ratio, taken through a series of years, of graduates to total enrolment in the school is above the average for the state or the nation.

The further fact that the class studied falls only two or three per cent below the average ratio, for this school, of graduates to enrolment indicates that many other schools must be in like condition. The actual disintegration has been unsuspected, probably, because the records have not been carefully studied. Our purpose in committing these figures to print is to induce just such study and then, if possible, to find the remedy.